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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP AND EAP/CM

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TAGS: PREL MARR PGOV CH

SUBJECT: CHINA SEEKS REDUCTION IN SURVEILLANCE SHIP ACTIVITY FOR SUCCESSFUL SUMMIT

Classified By: Acting DCM William Weinstein. Reasons 1.4 (b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Asking the United States to focus on the importance of a successful G-20 meeting in London and the overall bilateral relationship, MFA DG for North American and Oceanian Affairs Zheng Zeguang formally protested a perceived increase in U.S. Navy surveillance activity in China's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) since the March 8 incident involving the USNS Impeccable. During a March 25 meeting at the MFA, Zheng claimed that since the recent incident in the South China Sea the U.S. Navy had increased patrols by ocean surveillance ships and had begun using warships to escort those vessels. This increase in the tempo of activity was being widely reported in the Chinese media and was causing pressure on the PRC government to respond. Zheng expressed China's desire that this issue be dealt with calmly and in the collegial spirit of recent conversations between senior Chinese and U.S. leaders. Zheng insisted that U.S. ships were now operating in China's EEZ with a higher degree of frequency than they had in the past. Zheng said that the Chinese Embassy in Washington would deliver the same points on March 25 to the State Department and the NSC. A/DCM responded that the U.S. had the right to conduct military activities within a country's EEZ, and our position was supported by international law. Furthermore, the disagreement only served to underscore the need for improved military-to-military relations and high-level military visits. End Summary.

Don't Hurt the Overall Relationship

¶2. (C) In a March 25 meeting at the MFA, North American and Oceanian Affairs DG Zheng Zeguang delivered a formal demarche to the Acting DCM protesting recent surveillance activities conducted by U.S. Navy vessels in China's EEZ. Zheng prefaced his formal remarks by emphasizing the positive direction of bilateral relations as evidenced by the successful visit of Secretary Clinton to China and the reciprocal visit of Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi to Washington. Zheng noted that President Obama would meet with Chinese President Hu Jintao on the margins of the London G-20 meeting on April 1 and that China and the United States had a shared interest in that meeting being successful. "The world needs us to work together to solve a whole host of issues," he said. However, Zheng maintained, since the recent incident involving the USNS Impeccable and Chinese vessels in the South China Sea, U.S. Navy ships, "one after another" had continued to conduct surveillance activities in China's EEZ. These activities were widely reported in the international media and were creating pressure from Internet users and others for the PRC government to respond.

Increased Activities

¶3. (C) Turning to his prepared remarks, Zheng told the ADCM that after the March 8 incident involving the USNS Impeccable, the Impeccable returned to the South China Sea and operated in China's EEZ conducting surveillance activities there while escorted by the USS Chung-Hoon, an Aegis destroyer. During the same period, the USNS Victorious and the USNS Effective conducted similar operations either in China's EEZ in the South China Sea or the East China Sea. In fact, Zheng read, almost every day since the incident, USNS surveillance ships operated in the two areas, often escorted by the USS Chung-Hoon or her sister ship, the USS Kidd. Further complicating bilateral relations was the recent South China Morning Post story about the R/V Marcus Langseth, a scientific research vessel operated by Columbia University that had requested permission to conduct scientific research in China's EEZ but had been refused permission. The increased tempo of USN surveillance activity, coupled with the media spin on the Marcus Langseth request, were causing a media sensation in China, Zheng said, that risked jeopardizing a successful Presidential Summit.

China Asks U.S. to Reduce Tempo

¶4. (C) After repeating China's stance that military surveillance activity in another country's EEZ violates the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and Chinese

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domestic law, Zheng asked whether the tempo of U.S. activities could be reduced in the lead-up to the Summit. Zheng noted that after the March 8 incident officials on both sides of the Pacific led by Secretary Clinton and FM Yang as well as the U.S. CNO and his Chinese counterpart had agreed to deal with the disagreement in a "cool-headed and low-key" way and not allow it to jeopardize overall relations. Zheng said that since then, the PRC had exercised restraint but the U.S. had increased the tempo of surveillance activities. This disparity was viewed in Beijing as harming China's national security and the rights and interests China has in its EEZ. In order to avoid an escalation, Zheng suggested, it would be best if the U.S. took steps to reduce tensions. Zheng specifically asked that the United States recall its naval vessels from China's EEZ. Zheng also asked for assurances that the R/V Lanseth would not enter China's EEZ.

A/DCM: Disputes are legal in nature. Mil/Mil relations are key.

¶5. (C) The ADCM told Zheng that for years the U.S. position on its rights to conduct military activities within a country's EEZ had been well-known and were supported by international law. While China had a different interpretation of the UNCLOS, the A/DCM noted that the differences were legal in nature and should be resolved according to law. Furthermore, the disagreement only served to underscore the need for improved military-to-military relations and high-level military visits.

Pull-Aside) We're Under A Great Deal of Pressure

¶6. (C) In a pull-aside following the meeting, Zheng again emphasized to the A/DCM MFA's desire to have a successful Presidential Summit but suggested that the MFA was under "a great deal of pressure" from elsewhere in the PRC government to stop U.S. actions that were perceived as provocative. Zheng asked whether, in the lead up to the Summit, the USG might be able to reduce tensions. The A/DCM noted that China missed an opportunity to address the issue calmly by refusing to agree to a proposed April visit to Beijing by the U.S.

Pacific Commander. Zheng said he was aware of that issue but expressed his belief that the visit "delay" was due simply to scheduling difficulties, and that the Defense Ministry would likely propose a visit in June.

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